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THE TASK OF REMEMBRANCE: HISTORY AS THE BURDEN OF INHERITANCE AND AN OPPORTUNITY FOR JUSTICE

ABSTRACT

Artikel ini adalah refleksi atas pemikiran Walter Benjamin, terutama bagaimana ia melepaskan sejarah dari tendensinya sebagai mekanisme opresi. Kuncinya adalah mengembalikan peran orisinal sejarah sebagai suatu bentuk kenangan yang tidak menekankan pencarian pengetahuan , melainkan upaya pembentukan hubungan. Hubungan ini, seperti ditekankan Derrida, dilandasi beban warisan, dimana mereka yang masih hidup senantiasa berduka atas mereka yang mati dan terpanggil untuk terus meluruskan masa lampau yang tidak adil. Tugas mengenang ini bukan hanya berarti mendengarkan suara sejarah lokal, melainkan lebih radikal, yaitu

senantiasa melihat sejarah sebagai masa lampau yang "belum selesai". Maka untuk melepaskan sejarah dari barbaritas peradaban, pola naratif harus diganti dengan sekedar fragmen-fragmen. Fragmen, sebagai alat representasi, memungkinkan masa lampau terus menerus dialami kembali sebagai kebenaran. Dalam mengenang sejarah sedemikian itulah studi sejarah dialami sebagai beban tanggungjawab etis dan menjadi peluang ke arah keadilan.

Key Words:
Memory • Remembering • Forgetting • Official history • Process of silencing • Counter-history • Anonymous toil • Enshrined heritage • Barbarity of the past • Unfinished • Mourning • Presencing • Becoming a force

Introduction

History is undeniably crucial to human civilization. We see the important role of memory in the construct of a nation and in the shaping of identity of a people. We are who we are in the present because of the values and mores we choose to commemorate. But more importantly, we are a people, intimately bound by the memory of collective suffering. We are connected not only in the sense that we empathize and feel the imperative to *never* forget certain events, but also that together, we *hope*, that memory will serve as a constant remainder why it is we must never tolerate the same atrocities to happen again.

In the development of our historical consciousness, we realize that remembering is always as selective process. What we choose to remember, we deem more important than what we banish to forget. It is precisely because of this principle that any "official history," though it intends to effectively bind a people, will always be subject to suspicion; for like any narrative, its existence will depend on the weeding out of elements that do not contribute to its logic. And although it tries to establish a form of unity, it is also a "process of silencing"[1] that results ironically to collective exclusion.

To address this problem of silencing in history, significant developments have been made in the realm of historiography. Over the past decades, we have seen a renewed interest in the methods of the *Annales* school, particularly in the compilation of life stories and testimonies of

"common people," all of which fall under the category of what we call "oral history." The aim of this technique is certainly "to elaborate counter-history'from the bottom up', and to reconstruct the version of the 'conquered.'"[2] But more importantly, this effort to encourage the proliferation of collective memories reveals a certain maturity in our understanding of the nature of remembering: that remembrance is no longer perceived as the accurate depiction of a distant past but rather a representation that makes the past a part of present life.[3]

What follows in this paper is an attempt to further our understanding regarding the task pf remembering, and how it can make a significant impact on our present life. In reflecting on the ideas of the German-Jew philosopher Walter Benjamin, we will argue how remembering, in its essence, can never lead to silencing or exclusion. Rather, it is always an establishment of a relation that constantly seeks to rectify pas injustices.

History as Enshrined Heritage

In an essay entitled "Theses on Philosophy of History, "Walter Benjamin addressess the problem of historical silencing. Official history, which is always based on the perspective of the victor, is here metaphorically described as a "triumphal procession," where those who have conquered in the past defeated. According to Benjamin, it is "traditional practice," in a procession such as this, for the victor to parades," or what constitute the loudness of authority that it "*deafens*" us to the truth of their real origin. Benjamin cause they dazzle and invoke in us a sense of pride, we easily forget that these spoils did not merely exist because of the work of great men but were also produced by the "anonymous toil" and suffering of nameless people.

It is upon reflecting on this image one begins to understand why Benjamin insists that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[4] The barbarity of official history, however, lies not only in discrediting other narratives, but also in making us deaf, and therefore completely oblivious, to the injustice that quietly banishes the memories pf past suffering to forgetfulness. And what further makes this form of barbarity profoundly damaging, is that ots existence has effectively established a legacy, transmitting itself form one generation to the next, so that all present rulers inevitably become "the heirs of those who conquered before them."[5]

In the *Theses*, Benjamin argues that what perpetuates this legacy of barbarism is a distorted view of history which he attributes to the adherents of Historicism. In this view, the historian insists on seeing "*purely* into the past"[6] and depicts events the way they happened. For Benjamin, this establishes a form of continuity[7] that reveals an "empathy with the victor."[8] The continuity obviously refers to the chronological sequence of events that shows the "causal connection between various moment."[9] But perhaps what may not be so apparent, and thus what needs further explanation, is how this method of presentation favors the oppressors of history. In what way does continuity, intrinsic to the structure of the narrative, become problematic?

In his collection of notes and fragments, Benjamin argues that the view of history that showed things "as they were." Was" the strongest narcotic of the century"[10] He believed that underlying this view was the delusion that the past is a "timeless truth" that not only promises to remain the same for all eternity but also appears as what "will not escape us." But in the historicist's attempt to capture and present an"eternal image of the past,"[11] he reifies the past into a commodity[12], a piece of knowledge that Benjamin describes as what can easily be possessed by the mind.[13] The problem with this is that, as knowledge, the past is seen merely as an event *of* the past, as something that is "over and done with."[14] It is "finished" in the sense that its signification is completely and absolutely determined at the time of its occurrence. In a chronological sequence, an event is regarded solely as the effect of a previous incident. As such, the past can no longer be relevant to the concerns of the present, expect perhaps as information to the curious mind. An event that is "finished" would be, as Jean-Luc Nancy argues, "unable to open itself to any future….and unable to determine any historical present."[15]

It is clear at this point that the real problem for Benjamin is not much that official history silences the voices of the oppressed, or that it levels off the "peaks and crags" of history by bringing the past to forgetfulness or scorn. Rather, Benjamin sees more danger in how the past, as the collection of cultural treasures, is disseminated as "enshrined heritage."[16] For Giorgio Agamben, this would mean that the past, congealed into knowledge, is "caought in a determinate mode of its existence."[17] But how then does this lead to a complicity with the victor?

I believe the key is to understand further the problematic nature of the writing of knowledge, in which I have found the ideas of Plato of the contemporary philosopher, Maurice Blanchot, most insightful. In the

Phaedrus, Plato warns us about the suspicious character of writing in general. Although it may appear as "potion for memory and for wisdom, " it, in fact, introduces"forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it." Furthermore, those who use it will come to imagine that" they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing,"[18]

Although it is unlikely the Benjamin completely agreed with Plato on this, he certainly grasped quite adequately the problematic nature of writing. In this way, he is closer to the position fo Blanchot, who identifies the decadence of writing not on all of its instances but specifically in relation to knowledge. In the "writing of the Disaster," Blanchot, quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, speaks of the "suffering that we bear for 'knowledge' sake.'"[19] Here, knowledge is Here, knowledge is *the* disaster that "ruins books and wreck language.[20] " It is what exemplifies and carries out the betrayal of language in its failure to reveal the truth; for instead of making us remember, knowledge" carries us of…deport us…straighf to ignorance and puts us face with ignorance of the unknown so that we forget, endlessly."[21] In filling our heads with a mass of data, knowledge makes us imagine that we know when in truth we know nothing. And perhaps what is most frightening is that disaster conceals itself by exiling us to ignorance, makingus ignorant of the disaster itself and allowing it to persist unnoticed.

But what of this truth that knowledge fails to reveal? What do we forget in this writing of the disaster? Here, we return to Benjamin who complain that Historicism has made history "nothing but the residue of memorable things and events that never broke the surface of human consciousness because they were never, truly, that is politically, experienced."[22] Consequently, its study of the past, which is essentially a collection of fact, succeeds only in creating what Benjamin calls a "false aliveness of the past-made-present."[23] For Benjamin, this indicates that history has not only degenerate into the "heaping up of information,"[24] but has also lost every trace of its "original role as remembrance."[25] Instead of helping us remember, history has ironically taught us to forget: for in filling our heads with facts, we fail to remember the image of our "enslaved ancestor,"how they suffered and how the echoes of their lamentation continue to reverberate in the present. And because we fail to see this truth, we become blind to the demand made upon us in the present, and that is to acknowledge and rectify past injustices. Consequently, in our failure to remember, we allow our time to be a mere continuity of the barbarity of the past.

The Task of Remembering as the Burden of our Inheritance

To redeem history from its complicity with the oppressors, we must restore its capacity for remembering. And here, the task is first and foremost to avert forgetfulness by constantly bringing to thought what we continually deny recognition: that, in Benjamin's words, the "state of emergency is not the exception but the rule."[26] A threat is always in our midst, and it is not so much that past is in danger of being forgotten or scorned but that it is constantly consigned to a"determinate mode of transmission." The task of the historian is therefore to wrest tradition from the "enshrined heritage" it constantly threatens to become.

To do so, the historian must divorce himself from any attachment to this "document fo barbarism. "He must constantly" brush history against the grain,"not only by critically examining established historical facts but more radically, by rejecting evolutionary presentation. In the attempt to redeem the past from its determinate mode of existence, the historian must accomplish a disruptive blasting of historical continuity. In this destructive process, events are sprung loose from the temporal succession to which they have been consigned. Detached from their context, event are no longer perceived as interconnected moments in a narrative but are grasped as images.[27] As image, events become open-ended, and never absolutely "present." Their unfinished character is due to the fact that their significance can never be fully determined or exhausted at the time of occurrence. Their meaning can only be unraveled processually, in time, as they establish what Benjamin calls "correspondence to events in the present. Here, events are no longer regarded in "terms of stasis," or what is "fixed and permanent."[28] Instead, they area perceived as a "becoming of force,"a form of "presencing" that step into our lives like specters that constantly haunt the present.[29] To experience events as such is to experience them beyond mere facts. Through correspondence, event become truly historical, which for Benjamin only happens "posthumously,"or when an event can be related to other events "that may be separated from it by thousands of years."[30]

According to Benjamin, these correspondences are what constitute the "data of remembrance."[31] Such claim is important as it reveals to us what it truly means to remember the past: That it is not to recollect an "eternal image" of what has happened; rather, it is, as correspondences show, to recognize "what-has-been" in the now. What become essential to the task of remembering is therefore not the acquisition of knowledge about what

has happened, but the establishment of a relation between the past and the particular making is that, while the former misinterprets remembering as a way of control that not only possesses the event in the mind but makes memories appear whenever one wills it, the latter is more faithful to the real nature of remembrance.

First of all, in recognizing the inextricable link between "what-has-been" and the now, we acknowledge that memory is not so much what is voluntary, or what Benjamin describes as the "permanent recording of any event at any time in place."[32] Rather memory is often times *involuntary,* what se cannot force and thus what can only be trigered accidentally by a sensation in the present. Here, we realize that the act of remembering is, in fact, a presence of mind that captures the brief instance when the truth of a correspondence appears. Indeed, this only proves, contrary to what historicists claim, that truth is not "what will not escape us, "but is, in fact, very fleeting. And thus, one of the real threats to which the past is subjected is that we fail recognize its correspondence whit the present. To fail to see the correspondence is to fail to experience the past politically-that the past can, in fact, be a source of truth that reveals to us that things are never quite finished, and that our ancestors continues to lament as the injustices reestablish themselves in the present.

Secondly, to understand remembering as the establishment of a relation rather than the acquisition of facts would be to acknowledge that an historical event has a determining force that simply cannot be exhausted of measured. This is why Blanchot asserts that remembering is that which "seeks to know in order to resist forgetting, but at the same time knows that it can never know."[33] And here, we see that remembering, as the establishment of relation, is founded on respect. In acknowledging the event as what can never be truly grasped or objectified, the past is experienced as truth, that Benjamin characterizes as immeasurable, or what will never be completely "present" to consciousness. As such, the past is always experienced as what will never be completely finished.

But what of the past will never fully comprehend? I believe the answer to this lies in understanding that remembering, as the establishment of relation, does not only pertain to the correspondence between the dead and the living. Using metaphorical language, Benjamin explains how the living is "*obliged* to prepare a banquet for the past." And how the historian assumes the role of "the herald who invites the dead to the table."[34] It is an obligation that we feel heavily upon us, because as Benjamin further explains, we alone have been endowed with a "weak, Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim."[35]

Obviously, this Messianic power alludes to the task of every present generation to ensure retroactive justice that will rectify past constitutes our heritage. Often times, we erroneously think that heritage is the collection of "culture treasures," with which we fill our heads and surround ourselves. But as Jacques Derrida insightfully argues:

> That we are heirs does not mean that we *have* or that we *receive* this or that, some inheritance that enriches us done day with this or that, but that the *being* of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like or know it or not.[36]

Indeed, our current existence is made possible because of the lives that have been spent for our sake. And here lies a paradox: that although our heritage is freely given as gift, we feel ourselves in debt. Because they have suffered, the dead is the Other who constantly puts my existence to question. And so we realize that "inheritance is never a *given*, it is always a task,"[37] a task inspired by a responsibility to the dead.

History, or the act of remembering, is precisely what constitutes this task. Mindful of heritage, the living is the collective I that is constantly in mourning. For in remembering, we realize not only that we will never fully comprehend the suffering of our "enslaved ancestors," but also that we will never fully exhaust the depth of our debt.

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End Notes:

1. Shoshana Felman, "Benjamin's Silence," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no.2 *Angelus Novus*: Perspectives on Walter Benjamin (Winter,1999):213.
2. Nathan Wachtel, "Introduction" in *Between Memory and History* (Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publisher, 1990),2 .
3. Ibid., 4-5.
4. Walter Benjamin,"Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Iluminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Shocken Book, 1969), 256 (thesis VII). Hereafter, this work is referred to as *TPH*
5. *TPH*, 256 (thesis VII)

6. Walter Benjamin, "Konvolut N [On The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress], in *Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tidemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1999), 470 [N7,5]. Hereafter, this work is referred to as *AP*.
7. *AP*,474 [N9a,5]
8. *TPH*. 256 (thesis VII)
9. *TPH*,263 (thesis X)VIIIA
10. *AP*, 463 [N3,4]
11. *TPH*, 262 (thesis XVI)
12. Walter Benjamin,"Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian,"in *One-Way Street and Other* Writings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley (London: Verso 2000), 360. Hereafter, this work is referred to as *EF*.
13. *EF*, 357. See also Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), 29. Here, Benjamin makes an important distinction between knowledge and truth. While the former is something that can be possessed by consciousness, truth is what is never wholly present.
14. *EF*, 360
15. Jean-Luc Nancy,"Finite History," in Birth to Presence, trans. Brian Holmes (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 146.
16. *AP*, 473 [N9,4]
17. Giorgio Agamben, "Language and History: Linguistic and Historical Categories in Benjamin's Thought," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. with an introduction by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1999), 60.
18. *Phaedrus* 275a-b from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997).
19. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of The Disaster,* trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995),3.
20. Ibid.,ix
21. Ibid.,3.
22. *EF*,360
23. Walter Benjamin,"Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of Histor, '"in *Selected Writing,1938-1940*,vol.4, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Other (Cambridge: The Belknap Press,2003),401. Hereafter, this work is referred to as *POCH*.
24. Walter Benjamin,"The Life of Studies," in *Selected Writing*,1913-1926, vol. I, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996),43.
25. *POCH*, 401.
26. *TPH,* 257 (thesis VIII)
27. *AP*,476 [NI,4]. "History decays into images, not stories."
28. Andrew Benjamin, *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism* (New York:

Routledge,1997)8.

29. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994),100. The idea of the specter os crucial to our present discussion as it perfectly represent the past. Like the "deferred spirit,"the past is what anticipates the promise of expiation. (Ibid., 136).
30. *TPH*,263 (thesis XVIIIa)
31. Benjamin,"On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illumination,* ed. Hannah Arrendt, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press,1994),177.
32. Benjamin, "Baudelaire, "186
33. Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, 89.
34. *AP.* 481[NI5,2]
35. *TPH,*254 (thesis II)
36. Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* 54.
37. Ibid.